

THE stage was set for one of the most exciting matches of the season at Loakes Park on Thursday night. Both Wycombe Wanderers and Enfield — age-old rivals from the past — were disputing the championship, a 4,500 crowd gathered expectantly, the title was in the balance . . . then everything fell a bit flat.

This match was all too reminiscent of the F.A. Cup final. The football was never really played at top pace, there was little goalmouth action and both defences performed admirably to keep the scoresheet to 0-0.

Although many of the spectators went away from Loakes Park well satisfied with what they had seen, I was disappointed. In my view, Wanderers have played a good deal better than this and had they done so on Thursday, they would have made themselves firm favourites for the title.

One of the troubles on Thursday was clear — neither side could afford to lose at any cost. The game was always tight and neither side gave away time or space. Both sets of defences played their hearts out with Brian Wilson in superb form for Enfield. Wycombe's man of the match was undoubtedly Terry Reardon. He finished the game with a black eye but nothing could detract from a marvellous individual performance. Without him, Wycombe would have been lost.

With defences dominating, chances were at a premium and throughout the 90 minutes I doubt whether there were more than five to each side.

Wycombe's main problems was generating any pace into their attacks. Their forwards are all quick and their excellent control and teamwork has destroyed many a defence over the years. Against Enfield, they were never in top gear. Time and again the approach work was pacy enough, Mick Holifield often breaking through on the left. But when they got within range of the penalty area they invariably stopped, looked for support and gave their opponents time to get as many as eight men back into their box.

There was quite a surprise when the team line-ups were announced. Steve Perrin was expected to return at the expense of Dylan Evans, but an injury to Tony Horseman meant Evans kept his place and Perrin slotted in alongside Keith Searle, "Bodger" was the substitute.

Enfield meanwhile, brought in Peter Cruse to play alongside their speedy front men Dennis Gill and Derek Baker. Despite this move, the Middlesex club placed more emphasis on defence than attack. If they didn't come for a draw, they certainly came to Loakes Park determined not to lose. I got the feeling that had they nicked a goal through Gill or Baker, they would have been happy to hang on until the close. It almost happened that way too.

Wanderers, a little edgy in the first 10 minutes, got in their first strike at goal in the 14th when Keith Mead's free kick was turned in by Evans. Searle had a split second to turn and shoot but sent the ball wide and high. Two minutes later Evans brought down Gary Hand's cross but volleed just wide.

Wyc Wanderers 0, Enfield 0 Report by STUART EARP

Then disaster almost struck.

John Tone, a little terrier who worked tirelessly in midfield, sent a through ball up to Gill. In one lightning moment he turned inside Mead, sprinted past Phillips and raced towards John Maskell. The keeper came out to narrow the angle as Gill sized up his shot. From the press box it looked a certain goal but Maskell just got a fingertip to the ball and saw it graze the left hand upright.

That was the closest either side came to scoring all night, Enfield must have felt unlucky not to hit the target on that occasion. Had they found the back of the net, I wouldn't have fancied Wycombe's chances of replying against the visitors' efficient defence.

The second half was almost a continuation of the first with Wanderers having more of the play but finding it increasingly difficult to break through. The more they pressed forward the more dangerous Enfield became on the break and Phillips had to bring Gill tumbling to the turf to stop him on two occasions. Referee Underwood, never a favourite of Wycombe's had words with both players.

Then, in the 64th minute, Perrin missed the best Wycombe chance of the night. Mead drove in a free kick to the near post where the impressive Searle outjumped Wilson and nodded into the box. The Enfield defence was, for once, caught napping and as the ball bounced down to Perrin he had a clear shooting chance from five yards. But leaning back, Steve lifted the ball high over the top.

A minute later Horseman came on for Kennedy while Perrin dropped back into midfield. This decision by manager Brian Lee emphasised his concern of the midfield. Kennedy, who has a tendency to fade, was

making no impression against Les Eason and Tone and the additional fire-power of Horseman gave Wanderers a better chance of finding that elusive goal. Unfortunately the ploy never really came off. Perrin looked a little lost in the foreign position while Horseman, apart from a couple of nice touches, was dominated by the defence.

The more the game went on, the more desperate Wanderers became, at one time thumping the ball high upfield in hope of a mistake by the defence.

Enfield again went close when Gill outpaced Phillips and raced into the box. Alan did well to get back and make the tackle which sent Gill sprawling in the penalty area but Mr. Underwood dismissed the penalty appeals signalled a 'dive'. For once, the referee was the crowd's favourite!

In the last 15 minutes there were three chances for Wycombe to snatch the goal that would have made them firm favourites for the title. The first was the best move of the entire match. Hand sent a long ball down the left flank to Horseman who rose and steered a lovely header infield. Holifield picked up possession and sprinted into the box finishing the attack with a fierce left foot shot. Unfortunately it flew high and wide.

Then Evans sent in a curling left foot drive after good work by Mead and Searle, only to see Lowe fling himself full length and hold the ball perfectly. The final chance came in the 81st minute. Searle turned well to set up a shooting chance for Perrin who was right on target despite a narrow angle. Brian Wilson, however, threw himself headlong in front of the ball which flew out to Holifield. As with his other efforts, Mick sent this one over the top.

After that, the match petered out for the last few minutes with neither side willing to risk anything at such a crucial stage.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, G. Hand; H. Kennedy (sub A. Horseman 60 mins); T. Reardon, M. Holifield; D. Evans, K. Searle, S. Perrin.

ENFIELD: M. Lowe, A. Jennings, P. Fry, B. Wilson, F. Callaghan; J. Tone, L. Eason, M. O'Sullivan; P. Cruse, D. Baker, D. Gill, Sub B. Davis (not used).

Referee: K. Underwood (Romford). **Official paying attendance:** 3,950. **Approximate total attendance:** 4,500.

Although Howard Kennedy got in his one and only long range effort after 22 minutes which lifted over the top, Wanderers just couldn't keep any sustained pressure on the visitors. Thanks to Reardon and Holifield, however, a greater share of the ball was assured and when Perrin got to the bye-line and crossed the ball past keeper Mick Lowe things looked good before Callaghan cleared off the line.

For 40 minutes of the first half the Wycombe defence coped easily with everything Enfield had to offer. As Cruse faded into midfield, Gill and Baker were mastered in the air by Alan Phillips and Keith Mead and by keeping tight on the floor, they gave the Enfield strikers no room to turn and use their pace.